



A good-size crowd turned out recently at the Pen-Col dairy farm of Chris and Dennis Wolf to

question U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland, at left.

family farm along with a farm machinery business.

Bergland's philosophy about credit probably traces back to that modest start in Roseau County's grain country. He strongly advises young farmers to "start carefully," citing the example of one neighbor back home who "started first class and is now in trouble."

"Finance what you must have and buy what you want only when you can afford it. Borrow carefully."

Questions on the grain embargo against Russia were usually some of the first tossed to the Secretary in meetings with farmers and the press. Just what had the embargo done to grain prices, and what about recent news reports that Argentina is selling to the Soviets at above market prices?

"Grain sales are booming. Sales have increased to Mexico, China, Japan, Australia, Canada, Eastern Europe and France," was his assurance, although he acknowledged that it's definitely a time for sellers to hold and buyers to stock up due to the prices.

"The left hand in Argentina doesn't know what the right is doing, and reports from there are conflicting. If they are selling to the Russians, then they're doing so at the expense of their regular customers, like the Italians, Japanese and Spanish. If they abandon those regular customers, we'll get 'em."

"I've already been in contact with some of those customers and made a proposition to them. We're telling the Argentinians, 'You can have the Russians'."

"We know that milk production is down five percent in Russia in the past several months and there's a heavy culling of livestock with no expansions as was planned. Pork and poultry output is being curtailed; we guess meat production will

be down five to ten percent. It's a major economic problem for them."

Reports of third party sales of grain and technology to the Soviets are largely unfounded, Bergland added. "The Commerce Department has very good control and I cannot imagine any leakage of anything important. And we've never sold them anything military since the war. When a ship leaves, we know where it's going; we have very good cooperation from the grain companies on this."

What about those grain companies? We hear conflicting reports, but how much of the grain reserves are they controlling, I wondered?

"Grain dealers aren't holding enough grain to wad a shotgun," was his graphic description. "Farmers are holding it. Dealers can't afford the cost of the inventory of large amounts of grain."

Restructuring of the farm taxing system is one area on which Bergland plans to concentrate. Estate taxes, the "sell the farm to pay the tax" syndrome, will continue to get administrative attention in those long range ag policy plans.

Another tax category Bergland expects to use the scissors on is in the investment credit laws.

Investment credit, he says, is another of those subsidies that favors the large over the small operator. Business capital, for instance, has used it to build huge hog set-ups, dragging down not only pork prices, but other meats, too.

The current situation, with prices below the cost of production, worries him.

But the worst thing that could happen, he warns, would be the wholesale abandonment of beef, pork and poultry production, inevitably leading to shortages.

"I'm recommending a  
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## Bergland interview

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with operators who take other jobs to supplement their income. That group of 1.7 million provides about a tenth of the nation's food supply.

USDA plans to offer assistance to them through programs of rural development, production diversification, FmHA lending policies, water and sewerage systems, and aid to industries desiring to locate in rural areas.

Large farms are the ones that Bergland warns are in the most trouble right now, with credit problems. They're the group that produces half the food supply. But they're also the group, according to the Secretary, that perhaps least needs the aid of government programs, while collecting almost half of the support pricing assistance.

But, is it fair to those full-time farmers trying to make a total living from agriculture for the government to give so much aid to

smaller ones subsidizing their production costs with an off-farm job?

Well, that's not completely fair, either, allows the Secretary; and the administration will examine and carefully weigh the needs of all groups. "We'll have to identify those programs that are fair, and those that are unfair," he reflects.

As Bergland told farmers at various stops throughout the day, there simply are no easy answers. In fact, earlier during his visit to the Beshore operation, one farmer admiringly commented that it "really took guts for him to come out here, with the way farmers feel about inflation and the interest rates."

"When I took this job, against the recommendation of my dad," the Secretary grins, "he warned me that 'no matter how hot the hen, it still takes 21 days to hatch the egg.' There will be no quick solutions to the complex problems of agriculture."

Standing on the firing line facing a cluster of frustrated farmers doesn't seem to fluster the articulate and business-like USDA boss, who knows his answers and pulls statistics from memory to back them up. He leaves you feeling that he really does care about farm families, and what's happening to them.

Born and raised a farmer in Roseau County, Minnesota, near the Canadian border, Bergland still owns his 600-acre grain operation there. His great-grandparents immigrated to America from south Norway. As a boy, he helped milk the family's eight cows, by hand, and separate the cream for sale to the small creamery nearby. When the area's creameries started to fold, the family parted with the dairy animals.

At the age of 21, he started farming "with nothing but a wife and a rented farm." In 1970, on his second try, he won his seat in Congress, defeating the Republican incumbent of several years.

The Berglands have six children ("I've got three in college at once," he noted), with one operating the

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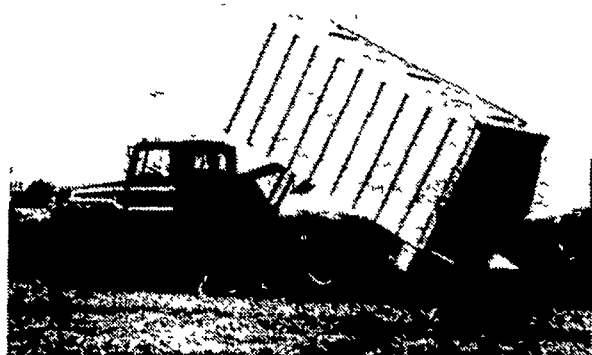
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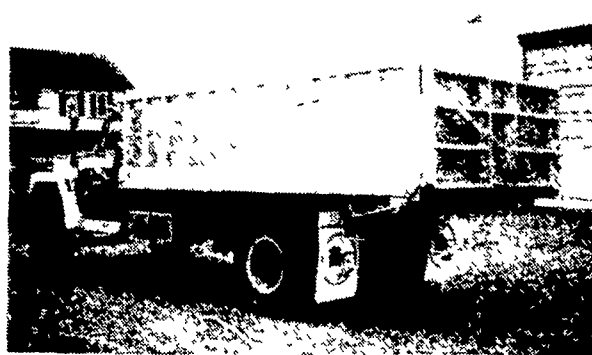
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